MITHILA AFTER THE JANAKAS
(A Critical Appraisal of the Nature of State)

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Mithila is the name of the tract of land bounded on the north by the foot-hills of Himalayas, on the south by the Ganges, on the west by the Gandaka and on the east by the Kosi and Mahananda rivers. It is the north Gangetic plain of Bihar extended in the Terai area of Nepal. The adventurous clan of the Videhas,[1] led by Videgha Mathava or Videha Mathav and their priests of Gautam's race, dashed from Sarasvati across the Sadanira (Gandaka), swooped down upon the marshy and unclutivated land, caused Agni Vaisvanara, the Fire God, to taste it through sacrifices and ultimately settled itself into the region which later came to be renowned as the famous land of the Videhas under the Janaka dynasty, a supreme seat of learning and philosophy in the ancient world. The *Satapatha Brahmana* narrates the story of its colonisation[2] and the five Puranas[3] supply the names of at least 53 Kings of the Janaka dynasty, which is complemented with some more names by the *Mahabharata* and the Jatakas.[4] Mithila was ruled over by the Janakas (the family name of the kings of Mithila[5]) for more than five centuries and the last king of the Janaka-line was Karala Janaka, who was overthrown and perished along with his kingdom and family through a popular revolt.[6]

What happened in Mithila after the end of the rule of Karala Janaka is not clear—Was a republic established here? Or, did it join the Vajjian confederacy as a member? Or, did it continue as a monarchy though under a different dynasty? Or, did it disintegrate and lose its importance as an ancient state? The present article is an attempt to inquire into the answers of these questions and to present a critical appraisal of the nature of state after the fall of the Janakas in Mithila.

I

At present it is almost universally accepted that after the death of Karala Janaka Mithila turned into a republic and became a component part of the Vajjian confederation which was later destroyed by king Ajatshatru of Magadha. It is also considered that Mithila was one of the eight constituent clans of the Vajjian confederacy. This view of the 'Videhan Republic' is based on the information supplied by Alexander Cunningham's *The Ancient Geography of India*, and has been in the field of historiography since the very beginning of this century. Cunningham describes Mithila region as follows:[7]

'In the time of Buddha, and for many centuries afterwards, the people of Vaishali were called Lichhavis; and in the Trikandsesha, the names of Lichhavi, Vaideha and Tirabhukti are given as synonyms. Videha is well known to the readers of the *Ramayana* as a common name of Mithila, the Country of Raja Janaka, whose daughter Sita is also named Vaidehi.....'Huen Tsang gives the name of the country in its Sanskrit form, as Fo-li-shi, or Vriji; but it is also stated that the people of the north called the country San-fa-Shi, or Samvaji, which is the Pali form of Samvriji, or the 'United Vrijis. From this name, I infer that the Vrijis were a large tribe which was divided into several branches, namely the Lichhavis of Vaishali, the Vaidehis of Mithila, the Tribhuktis of Tirhut etc. Either of these divisions separately might therefore be called Vrijis as well as Samvrijis or the 'United Vrijis."'

He further informs about this region in the followng manner:-[8]

'In the time of Buddha, the Vrijis were divided into several clans, as the Lichhavis, the Vaidehis, the Tirabhuktis, and others, whose names are unknown. The exact number of their clans would appear to have been eight, as criminals were arraigned before the Atthakulaka or "eight clans" which appears to have been a jury composed of one member from each of the separate division of the tribe."

Cunningham made his observations on the authority of G.Turnour who has given an account of the people of Wajji from the Pali Cronicles of Ceylon. According to him, "the union of the Wajjian states consisted of a confederation of chiefs."[9] For the first time T.W. Rhys Davids suggested that in Mithila, monarchy turned into republic in Buddha's time. To quote him, "The Vajjians included eight confederated clans, of whom the Lichhavis and the Videhas were the most important. It is very interesting to notice that while tradition makes Videha a kingdom in earlier times, it describes it in the Buddha's time a republic."[10] Thus Rhys Davids confirmed the proposition of Alexendar Cunningham, but he referred to no source. As far as assertion of Mithila as a republic by Cunningham is concerned his whole argument rests on two words, *viz.*, San-fa-Shi and Atthakulaka. The first word San-fa-Shi is not found in the account of Huen Tsang. It is in a note added to the text.[11] Moreover it is a very late piece of evidence from a foreigner and refers to name prevalent among the Northern people. The second word Atthakulaka found only in Buddhaghosha's Sumangalavilasini, is a judicial word and represents the council of Final Appeal in the Vajjian state. It has nothing to do with the eight clans of the Vajjian republic. Thus the whole edifice of the united vajjis consisting of eight clans including the Videhas, was only a presumption of Cunningham that was given a shape of a definite theory by T.W.Rhys Davids. This

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theory received fresh strength when H.C. Raychaudhari[12] attempted to find enough names to make up the traditional number of eight and suggested the following as the `eight confiderate clans' or `people of the confederacy' the old Videhas, the Lichhavis, the Jnatrikas, the Vrijjis, the Ugras, the Bhojas, the Aikhvakas and the Kauravas. He has found six clans that were subjects of the same ruler and members of the same assembly in a Jaina work the Sutrakritanga,[13] to which he added two *viz.*, the Vrijjis and Videhas in order to bring the total to eight. However the names of the ruler and the assembly of this Jaina religious work remain unidentified. Even then scholars like R.C. Majumdar, K.P. Jayaswal, B.C. Law, D.R. Bhandarkar, Shyam Narain Singh, A.S.Altekar and Upendra Thakur accepted the Videhas as a republican clan, following Rhys Davids and Raychaudhuri,[14] though they could not devote much space to their republican aspect.

J.P. Sharma of the University of Hawaii is the only writer, who has emphasised the republican character of the Videhan republic and has tried to furnish details of its republican institutions. In his book, Republics in Ancient India, he has presumed that Videha was Vaishali in miniature. He says, "As they were members of the Vajjian Confederacy, it seems likely that the Videhans had an assembly, similar to the Licchavis. As we have no details regarding the Videhan Sangha, we shall have to depend upon a comparison with the Licchavian institutions."[15] Without referring to any convincing evidence J.P. Sharma has imagined that in the 'Republic of Videha' there were not only an assembly but also a council, public officers, a ganamukhya and even a ganika, the courtesan. In support of his pre-supposition J.P.Sharma's arguments are as follows:

1. "The references to Videhan kings in the Jatakas run into the thousands—who ruled at the capital of Mithila—supports the view that—the humorous remark of the Lalitavistara about the members of the Licchavian Assembly all being called rajas, might be equally applicable to the Videhas.[16]
2. "The Mahanarada-Kassapa Jataka lends support to the view that the Videhas had a council of four—it is possible that three councillors and the king composed the council of the Videhas—the Mahanarada-Kassapa Jataka also informs us that the king was assisted in the administration of justice by a council.[17]
3. "A Jataka refers to a king of Videha and seven main officers—This Jataka has muddled the two traditions-the Brahmanic tradition of Videha having been a kingdom and the Buddhist tradition of its being a republic with a king chosen by the assembly. Out of these seven officers only four appear to be public officers, the raja,

uparaja, senapati, and bhandagarika, while the others were apparently the personal servants and attendants of the king.[18]

4. "The Mahajanaka Jataka also attest to the fact that the king was chosen by a qualified body of citizens.[19]

5. "According to the Gandhara Jataka, Videha had not only 16,000 villages with well-filled store-houses, but also 16,000 dancing girls. Thus it would appear that, whatever the number of villages, each village and town had its dancing girl or courtesan — a later source, *Bhagavata Purana* informs us that Pingala was the courtesan of the Videhans of Mithila. She is said to have spent her life as a public woman."[20]

J.P. Sharma furnished his arguments on the basis of Jataka, which in their main story portions do not know Videha as a republic. At one place Sharma has himself accepted that, "The references to Videha in the Jatakas are ambiguous, because it is not clear whether they refer to monarchy or the republic."[21] In fact all the evidences cited by him refer to the earlier monarchical era. He has arbitrarily transferred them to suit his idea of republic. Mahajanaka Jataka only mentions the selection of Mahajanaka II to the royal throne of Mithila. Sharma takes it to be the procedure for the appointment of the gana mukhya of the Videha Sangha. Likewise his statement that "Pingala—was chosen to be the courtesan of the republic",[22] is wrong. Moreover the mere existence of courtesans in a state cannot automatically make it a republican state. Apart from Jatakas, J.P. Sharma has also cited the Buddhist canons like the *Vinaya Pitaka*, *Anguttara Nikaya*, *Majjhima Nikaya*, *Khuddakapatha* and *Paramatthajotika* for holding the view that the Videhas were a republic during the Buddhist period. But it is strange that none of these Buddhist texts refer to Videha as a republic, rather most of the sources quoted by him are irrelevant.

Thus the whole edifice of the United Vajjis consisting of eight clans including the Videhas was never examined seriously. It is only a presumption which is accepted by most of the historians without any question.

II

In 1981, Yogendra Mishra came forward to question the idea of republic in Mithila after the fall of Janaka dynasty. In his scholarly written book *History of Videha*,[23] he has raised some serious objection against the theory of republican nature of state in Mithila and has proposed that Videha continued to be monarchy after the death of Karala Janaka and did not form part of the Vajjian confederacy in any way. In his opinion the kingdom of Mithila continued to function and remained

independent even after the conquest of Vaishali by Ajatashatru. According to him Mithila was finally conquered by Mahapadma Nanda and annexed to the growing Magadhan empire. Mishra has asserted that Videha is never mentioned as republic in ancient Indian literature, rather it is frequently mentioned as a monarchy. To confirm his observations Yogedra Mishra's argument runs as follows.[24]

"While nowhere is this stated that Videha was a republic in the age of the Buddha, we come across the names of some kings of Videha in the Buddhist literature who apparently belonged to the sixth century B.C. or later (but not earlier than Karala Janaka on any account).

The *Dipavamsa* — says that Karala Janaka's son was Samamkara who was followed by king Asoka, an inaugurated prince. Earlier, it informs us that the last of the Kings (of Champanagar) was Nagdeva——his sons and grandsons, twenty-five princes governed their Kingdom in the town of Mithilanagara, the last of these Kings was valiant Buddhadatta, his sons and grandsons, twenty-five princes, governed their great kingdom in Rajagaha, best of the towns. Thus the *Dipavamsa* seems to preserve the following traditions about Videha - (i) that there were kings at Mithilanagara even after Karala Janaka; (ii) that twenty-five kings or so ruled at Mithilanagara, the last of them being valiant Buddhadatta; and (iii) that the kingdom passed on to the master of Rajagriha (Pataliputra), i.e. Magadha — "The *Lalitavistara* gives an interesting account of king Sumitra of "the very charming city of Mithila". — Although the description is conventional, the existence of a ruling monarch at that time (twelve years before the birth of Bodhisattva, i.e. 597 B.C.) cannot be denied, especially when republican Vaishali is also described there as a contrast.

"According to the tradition preserved in Tibetan literature, a minister of King Virudhaka of Videha, named Sakala, was compelled to flee Vaishali from his own country owing to the jealousy of other ministers.

"Another version of the story is available in the Gilgit Manuscripts (Vol.III, Part II, pp.3-5) where Khanda is the prime minister of an unnamed king of Videha — other ministers, becoming jealous — approached the king and — the king — looked for an opportunity to bring about his downfall. Khanda — became afraid and thought thus, "where shall I go? If I go to Sravasti, it is under a king, and so there would be the same troubles, so would be the case in Varanasi. Rajagriha and Champa, which are all subject to the authority of one person (ekadhina). Vaishali is under a gana (ganadhina): What is desired by ten is disliked by twenty."—The Gilgit Manuscripts passage leaves no doubt that in the 6th Century B.C. Videha was a monarchy

like Kosala and Magadha and unlike Vaishali.

Welcome light on this— is thrown by the Puranas which say that "between the compilation of the Puranas and the annihilation of Kshatriya states in India by Mahapadma Nanda there reigned among others 28 Mithilas (i.e. 28 Kings of Mithila). Thus the Puranas are of the opinion that monarchy continued at Mithila....till the time of Mahapadma Nanda."

As a confirmatory test Yogendra Mishra has also scrutinized some pertinent contemporary and later literary sources like the *Majjhima-Nikaya, Anguttara-Nikaya, Sutrakritanga, Kalpa, Sutra, Mahaparinibbana-sutta, Paramatthajotika, Arthashashtra* and *Manu-Smriti*. After going through the names of the republics mentioned in these texts, he has come to the conclusion that Videha is absent from certain important lists where normally speaking it should have been mentioned as a republic.[25] Thus in his opinion Mithila was a monarchy and not a republic in the post-Karalajanaka period. But he has failed to provide a systematic history of Mithila after the Janakas. His hypothesis is based on few references, which bear only the names of some kings of Mithila. He accepts, "Names of very few kings have come down to us, most of them from semi-legendary sources. However, in the absence of more information, we may accept them as working hypothesis."[26] Thus the view of Yogendra Mishra requires further investigation.

This is almsot clear that Mithila did not form a part of the Vajjian Republic and is never referred as a republic in ancient Indian literature. However, it is mentioned as a monarchy in some legendary and semi-legendary texts, though not frequently. The absence of Mithila from ancient Indian literature after the fall of Janaka dynasty indicates that it lost its significance. It is better to presume that the state system collapsed in Mithila region with the end of the mischievous rule of Karalajanaka, the last king of the Janaka-line. The *Arthashastra* and *Buddhacharita* give the story of the breakdown of the kingdom of Mithila. In the Arthashastra it is stated that "Bhoja, known by the name of Dandakya, making a lascivious attempt on a Brahamana maiden, perished along with his kingdom and relations, so also Karala, the Videha."[27] The Jayamnagala commentary of Bikshu Prabhamati on the same passage of *Arthashasra* further clarifies[28] that the king Karala Janaka on his pilgrimage to Yogeshwara, seeing the crowd with curiosity, glanced at a young and beautiful wife of Brahamana, and being struck with passion, he took her forcibly to the city. The Brahamana went to the city crying angrily as follows. "Why does that town not crack where such an evil soul resides?" Consequently the

earth cracked and the king perished in it along with his whole family. Ashvaghosha confirms this story. 'And Karala Janaka took away a Brahmana maiden and gained nothing but ruin, still he did not give up passion."[29] All these accounts indicate that the state system in Mithila collapsed due to the mischievous act of Karala Janaka. A further inquiry into the socio-economic development which took place in alluvial and marshy land of Mithila will certainly reveal that the Karala Janaka episode was merely the final scene of the drama, the collapse of the state-system.

III

From a careful study of the *Satapatha-Brahmana*[30] we can have an idea of the colonisation of Mithila. The land was highly unculitvated, marshy and full of dense vegetation. Burning was the only means for settlement and cultivation. It was adopted on considerable scale to clear the dense forests of Mithila. Agriculture had come to be the chief means of livelihood of the people, however cattle remained the principal form of their movable property. *Satapatha-Brahamana* devotes one whole Brahamana[31] to rites in connection with ploughing, Rice became the chief agricultural product and peasants produced some surplus to support the Brahamanas and Kshatriyas. An important development in the economy of Janaka period was the rise of diverse arts and crafts. Infact the colonisation period witnessed a great advance in the economy and material life of the people in Mithila. This helped in consolidation of state power under the Janakas.

Literary texts indicate the advent of iron about 700 B.C., for we have references to the black, dark metal in some very late Vedic texts.[32] Iron objects have been found in Chirand, Vaishali, Sonpur and Champa, which shows that the use of iron marked the beginning of a new era. The period from 700 B.C.– 600 B.C. may be taken as marking a significant change in the economy, which was strenthened by the widespread use of iron, the expensive cultivation of rice and sugar, further diversification of crafts and their organisation into guilds[33] and last but not least the emergence of numerous estates.

Due to its special topography, instead of strengthening the process of urbanization, the surplus agricultural production paved the way for the emergence of several estates which weakened the state-hood in Mithila region. In post Bharat-war period, the Jatakas supply at least four groups of kings of Mithila region such as Suruchi, Janaka, Sadhina-Narada and Nimi-Karala group. This shows the breakdown of the Mithila state. The rise of Sankasya line of kings and Vaishali as an independent state also indicates the disintergration of Mithila as a state. It is worthwhile to mention here that there is no evidence of

urbanization in this region. Neither any urban settlement nor the existence of money system has yet been found in Mithila. No doubt Mithila witnessed the iron based economy. Spurt in agriculture and development in diversified crafts took place here, but the absence of strong state and urban-centres reveals that Mithila disintegrated into numerous estates.

It is not out of place to mention that due to the chain of rivers, dense vegetation and marshy land Mithila has never remained an integrated province in historical age. After the fall of the Janaka dynasty its Western part merged into Vaishali and Eastern region of Mithila was submerged by Anga, whereas there emerged several independent estates ruled by local kings in central Mithila. Ajatashatru conquered Vaishali and Mithila is not mentioned anywhere as part of his empire or conquered area, which confirms the disintegration of Mithila.

Thus, it would be fair to conclude that after the fall of the Janakas, Mithila neither turned into Republic nor it remained united under monarchical form of government. Economic growth of the 6th century B.C. was a set back to the central authority of the Janakas. Karala Janaka episode was a final jolt to it. The period of colonisation was over and so the role of state in rural expansion. The new economy helped the rise of numberous estates at the cost of unified state system, which was finally conquered by Mahapadma Nanda and annexd to the Magadhan empire.

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